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AUTHOR	Lane, Brett
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ABSTRACT

The charter-school movement is a diverse and confusing collection of values, motives, beliefs, and assumptions. To help ease the confusion surrounding charter schools, an outline of the general purposes of the charter-school movement and the values behind these purposes are presented in this booklet. The intent is to provide a structure for productive policy discussion. Through the analysis of various stated purposes of the charter-school movement, four specific purposes or perspectives that focus on increasing student achievement are presented: (1) charter schools as the catalyst for systemwide change; (2) charter schools as the component of comprehensive education reform; (3) charter schools as a means to enhance individual equity; and (4) charter schools as a means to enhance group equity. The five chapters examine at length the rationale behind charter schools, asking whether they are simply a choice movement. Also discussed are the purposes and values behind charter schools, some policy alternatives and implications, and a matrix for policy perspectives and policy alternatives. The booklet concludes with a discussion of three general policy alternatives that appear integral to the success of the charter-school movement regardless of perspective. (Contains 25 references.) (RJM)

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Policy Alternatives and Implications for Charter Schools

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CHOICE MATTERS

Policy Alternatives and Implications for Charter Schools

April 1998

Brett Lane, Rural Education Program

Northwest Regional
Educational Laboratory

Abstract

The charter school movement is a diverse and confusing collection of values, motives, beliefs, and assumptions. Policy discussion regarding charter schools reflects this confusion. Due to the varied nature of charter school legislation, lack of consensus on the purpose and scope of charter policy, and constantly shifting local power struggles and political battles, charter school policy discussion is plagued by inconsistency and uncertainty. The intent of this paper is to outline the general purposes of the charter school movement, and the values behind these purposes, in order to provide a structure for productive policy discussion. Through the analysis of various stated purposes of the charter school movement, the author identifies four specific purposes, or perspectives, that focus on increasing student achievement. The four perspectives are: (1) charter schools as the catalyst for systemwide change; (2) charter schools as a component of comprehensive education reform; (3) charter schools as a means to enhance individual equity; and (4) charter schools as a means to enhance group equity. The author concludes with a discussion of three general policy alternatives that appear integral to the success of the charter school movement regardless of perspective. In conclusion, the author hopes that this report will engage policymakers, and other individuals interested in the charter school movement, in productive dialogue.

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Introduction

INTRODUCTION

During the past four decades, the school choice movement in public education has undergone multiple transitions and realignments. School choice has, in recent years, been promoted as a means to enhance diversity, increase student achievement, provide options to low-income parents and children, create an incentive to develop innovative curricula, and provide public school choices to culturally and ideologically diverse social and ethnic groups (Fuller & Elmore, 1996; Weaver, 1992; Wells, 1996). The latest, and perhaps the most promising, development in school choice is the charter school movement.

Charter schools represent a complex, and sometimes confusing, potpourri of values, ideas, reform initiatives, and curriculum innovations. Charter schools are not simply another type of "school choice" or another in a long line of reform measures. Charter schools not only hold the promise—yet unrealized—of allowing parents and children the opportunity to choose the school they would like to attend, but they also grant teachers and parents two additional opportunities, or choices. First, parents and teachers have the opportunity to actively create and develop new and innovative schools and curricula. Second, parents and teachers have the ability to transform an existing school into the school they envision. However, the possibilities presented by charter schools are still very much in the distant future. Indeed, the future of the current charter school movement lies in the hands of policymakers and local decisions made in the coming years. This paper intends to facilitate productive dialogue concerning the development and implementation of charter school policy specifically, and education policy in general, through the analysis of the values, intent, and purpose of the charter school movement and a discussion of policy alternatives corresponding to those values.

School Choice

School choice has been a major component of public and private schools in the United States over the past 40 years. Through magnet schools, alternative schools, home schooling, and private schools, parents and students from different geographic areas, ethnic groups, and socioeconomic levels have had increasing ability to choose the school they attend. Unfortunately, this system of choice has not decreased socioeconomic and racial inequity in terms of equitable access to quality schooling or actual achievement levels (Allen & Jewel, 1995; Dimond, 1995; Wilson, 1987). The current choice system, incorporating both the public and private spheres, has resulted in a polarization of American society between those with the financial and personal capacity to exercise choice, and those who, for whatever reason, are unable to choose or are ignorant of their ability to choose. As they presently exist, public schools do not provide equitable means to choose quality education.

The question, then, for policymakers and analysts is not "Should there be choice in public education?"—for choice already exists. Rather, the policy issues that need to be addressed concern how choice should be implemented. What policies, strategies, and mechanisms should be used to ensure that the basic intent and purpose of the choice movement, and charter schools, is realized? This is an extremely important point to take into consideration. Many policy

decisions made in past years have led to unexpected, and sometimes quite harmful, effects when implemented. Public housing, originally designed to provide low-income housing as a stepping stone for economically strapped citizens, led to centralized pockets of poverty and a reproduction of social (and in many cases ethnic) classes (Kozol 1992; Wilson, 1987). Desegregation initiatives, while successful in some areas, have not been able to overcome the combination of high concentrations of African American and Latino populations in inner cities and White flight to the suburbs (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP], 1992). Policy decisions and implementation do not exist in isolation.

Policymakers need to consider the external and internal context of a given situation when making policy decisions. First, policymakers should have a clear understanding of the values, purpose, and intent of the movement affected by their policy decisions—in this case, charter schools. Is the purpose of charter schools to provide high quality education to students at risk of failing and/or to provide innovative alternatives to various cultural and ethnic groups? Can charter policy provide both high quality education and innovative alternatives? Second, the design of the policy should consider and incorporate local and state context as well as the implications other policy decisions will have on the given policy design. How will local and state reform efforts affect charter school development? Third, policymakers must consider the assumptions their policy design makes about human and social actions, values, desires, and so on. Do all parents choose schools the same way, or are different issues more, or less, important for some parents?

The purpose of this report is to provide insight into and analysis of the intent, purpose, and values of the current charter school movement so that policy discussion, design, and decisions have a coherent and rational base from which to begin. The report has three sections. Section One presents a general outline of the current state of charter schools and its role in the school choice movement. Section Two focuses specifically on the general purposes, intents, and values expressed in the charter school movement. Care will be taken to outline how different values, and thus different ideas as to the purpose of charter schools, tend to apply to different types of charter schools within various state and local contexts. Section Three discusses many of the issues introduced in Section Two in an attempt to organize a possible framework for the design and implementation of charter school policy.

Charter Schools: Simply a Choice Movement?

CHARTER SCHOOLS

Charter schools are incredibly diverse. There are different types of charter schools. They are started for many different reasons, they serve various types of students, and they promote multiple learning and teaching strategies. As of fall 1997, there are approximately 780 charter schools currently operating in the United States. Twenty-nine states and the District of Columbia currently have charter school laws on the books.

The Concept

The basic charter school concept is encompassed in the idea of "autonomy for accountability." Charter schools are public schools that are granted a specific amount of autonomy (determined by state law and/or the local charter) to make decisions concerning the organizational structure, curriculum, and educational emphasis of their school. Charter schools are granted a waiver from certain regulations that typically bind public schools. In return for this autonomy, charter schools are held accountable for the academic achievement of the students in the charter school, and the school faces suspension or closure if accepted performance standards are not met. Depending on the state, charter schools may receive between 85 percent and 100 percent of the public school funds for each student enrolled.

The key component of the above stated "definition" is the concept of accountability. The accountability theme lies at the heart of all charter schools, no matter how diverse they might be. Accountability lends charter schools an air of legitimacy that typical public schools seem to be losing. Furthermore, the fact that accountability is an inherent component of the charter school concept guarantees that raising achievement levels will remain at the heart of the charter school movement. However, accountability can be a very elusive concept; as such, questions continue to arise concerning the measuring tools and tests used to measure performance and demonstrate accountability.

Charter School Specifics

Charter schools are public schools that are nonsectarian; cannot violate civil rights, health, safety, public disclosure, and other federal and state regulations; may not charge tuition; and, in most cases, are not allowed to use admission requirements. The first year report from the national study of charter schools outlined three types of charter schools. *Newly formed* charter schools are new schools formed by parents, teachers, and/or community groups. Newly formed schools are typically smaller schools (between 50-200 students). *Pre-existing* charter schools are existing public and/or private schools that are converted to charter schools. Conversion schools, as they are called, are typically larger schools and tend to be located in urban areas. *For-profit* charter schools are schools started by for-profit companies that hope to demonstrate that efficient teaching, governing, and financial operations will produce a high achieving school (RPP International and University of Minnesota, 1997).

According to the national study, charter schools are serving, on average, the same number of minority and low-income students as the public schools within their states (RPP International and University of Minnesota, 1997). However, the sample size for the first year study is statistically too small to make any generalizations relating to how charter schools may look in the coming years. Furthermore, the conversion of inner-city public schools that are typically larger and have a higher proportion of minority and low-income students may also contribute to biases in the data. Generalizations concerning the racial and economic distribution of students in charter schools are unjustified this early in the movement.

Charter Schools as Choice

Charter schools are generally characterized as a component of the school choice movement—a mid-point in the argument between vouchers as choice and magnet or alternative schools as choice. Charter schools incorporate choice mechanisms proposed by voucher proponents while ensuring that public money continues to fund public, nonsectarian education. However, charter schools represent a much broader and comprehensive view of school reform than is typically presented in arguments centered on school choice. To find out how charter schools differ from typical conceptions of school choice, let us first discuss the basics of school choice and then move on to an analysis of how charter schools fit into the school choice movement.

A. School Choice

Proponents of school choice usually focus on two interrelated propositions.

Proposition one (equal opportunity). An increase in the quantity of choices available (vouchers, charter schools, alternative schools, transfers) will give more and more parents the ability to exercise choice. As parents from diverse social and economic backgrounds rationally exercise their school preferences, schools will be held accountable for their results, and the free market will determine the success, content and structure of schools. School choice will result in equitable opportunity to choose.

Proposition two (academic achievement). An increase in the quantity and type of choices available, in conjunction with the exercise of parents' preferences and accountability mechanisms, will encourage innovation and the development of new and better teaching and learning strategies. Students will leave poor performing schools forcing those particular schools to improve performance or shut down. School choice will result in increased innovation, performance, and high achievement levels.

School choice arguments are, not surprisingly, focused on the exercise of choice by individual parents and their children and the effect this competition will have on the public school system. The exercise of choice and competition, it is argued, will lead to increased accountability, increased innovation, increased opportunity to choose, and, ultimately, gains in achievement levels for all students.

School Choice → Competition → Accountability → Innovation → Equitable Opportunity to Choose → High Achievement

The majority of these claims are as yet unfulfilled. (See Fuller & Elmore, 1996, for a detailed discussion.) How, then, does the charter school movement fit into the school choice movement?

B. Choice in Charter Schools

Charter schools provide two related types of choices:

Choice: the power to create and attend a new school. The ability of parents and/or teachers to choose and/or create their own public school based upon their own beliefs and theories as to what is best for their children.

Choice: decentralization or fiscal and curriculum autonomy. The ability of teachers and/or administrators to restructure an existing school based upon their experience and belief as to what is best for students.

The choices imbedded in the charter school concept are compatible with the arguments presented by *school choice* proponents (stated previously in A.). Charter schools provide *competition* to the traditional public school system. The charter school contract requires a statement of *accountability* in return for fiscal and curriculum autonomy. Charter schools provide the opportunity to develop and promote *innovative* teaching and learning strategies. Charter schools do hold the promise of *equitable opportunity to choose* assuming that the number of charter schools continues to increase, and are widely distributed, in the coming years. And finally, charter schools have a written contract outlining *achievement goals* for their school. Charter schools do encompass the major elements of school choice. However, charter schools include two additional components of educational reform not commonly held by the school choice movement.

The first component of education reform is the incorporation of decentralization/deregulation as a key component of school choice. Teachers and administrators have the opportunity—the choice—to radically restructure an *existing school* (financially and/or academically) and create the school they envision. Second, charter schools incorporate the idea that parents and teachers may choose to create a *new school* that is free from district constraint and is based upon their values and beliefs. Choice becomes more than simply being able to choose, among available schools, where your child should go to school. Choice is the ability, and opportunity, to choose to create the learning environment where you believe your child should go to school.

These two ideas, decentralization as choice and the ability of parents and teachers to choose to create a new public school, are relatively new to the school choice movement. While decentralization has often been mentioned along with school choice, it has never been a

necessary component of school choice arguments. Even more important, the idea that parents could create their own school has never been part of the lexicon of school choice. The incorporation of these two ideas into the charter school movement presents new and complex issues to policymakers and analysts. In other words, charter schools are not simply about choice, they are about large-scale school reform and the possibility for systemwide change.

The Purpose and Values Behind Charter Schools

THE PURPOSE AND VALUES BEHIND CHARTER SCHOOLS

The purpose and intent of the charter school movement are varied and complex. Different proponents of charter schools, from various political persuasions, tend to justify charter schools with diverse arguments and rationale. Some of the general purposes that guide the charter school movement—such as equity, innovation, the free market system, and accountability—were touched upon in the previous section. The following is a list of various "purposes" explored during the U.S. Department of Education 1997 Charter Schools National Conference, Strengthening Education Through Innovation and Public School Choice:

- Charters are to do what public schools already do—just do better.
- Charters are to do something different.
- Charter schools provide viable alternatives for the "square pegs"' in the system.
- Charter schools provide a testing ground for new governance models.
- Charter schools provide a testing ground for innovative teaching and learning.
- Charter schools can provide choice for all parents and students.
- Charter schools provide competition to the traditional public school system.
- Charter schools provide for increased accountability.
- Charter schools provide for increased accountability in traditional public schools.
- Charter schools provide the mechanisms for organizational changes, allowing opportunity for parents and teachers to teach what they want.
- Charter schools provide the impetus for systemwide change and reform—a catalyst for change.

This brief list of purposes and rationale for charter schools demonstrates the range of beliefs and values that encompass charter policy development. The following outline, drawn from the list presented above and additional research, provides a guide to charter school policy development and serves to structure the remainder of this report.

Purpose and Intent of Charter Schools

General Purpose: To increase student/academic achievement

A. How will student achievement be attained?
   1. Charter schools as the catalyst for systemwide change or *revolution*
   2. Charter schools as education *reform* (or a component of)

B. What mechanisms are utilized to achieve reform or revolution?
   1. Accountability
   2. Decentralization/deregulation (autonomy)
   3. Innovation
   4. Choice (market forces and competition)

C. At whom is improved student achievement directed (type of equity)?
   1. Individual Equity
   2. Group Equity

Overall, the long-term goal of the charter school movement is to increase academic achievement for all students. However, there are two distinct perspectives regarding the effect charter schools will have on academic achievement. Some charter school advocates argue that charter schools promote academic achievement by contributing to current education reform movements. Charter schools, they argue, allow parents and teachers the flexibility to quickly adopt and implement promising curricular and organizational reforms within the public school system. Other proponents of charter schools argue that charter schools will enhance academic achievement by providing the impetus for systemwide change and a radical restructuring of the public school system from its present operations. Dramatic organizational change will promote the development of a new "system" of public education better suited to meet student and societal requirements. These two categories can be thought of as "reform" or "revolution."

Both movements, charters as reform and charters as revolution, utilize a variety of *mechanisms* in their attempt to increase academic achievement. These mechanisms include many of the above stated "purposes" of charter schools: innovation, choice (competition), accountability, and decentralization (deregulation). Accountability, decentralization, specific innovations, and choice are mechanisms that, in theory, may increase overall student achievement and provide the impetus for systemwide change or reform. Each mechanism affects the impact of the charter school movement in different ways; consequently, each mechanism must be analyzed in relation to each other as well as within the specific local and national context.

While most charter school advocates agree on the purpose of the charter school movement, issues arise when proponents are asked how, for whom, or for what group of students academic achievement is to be raised. Statements such as "the market will force schools to improve and innovate" or "charter schools serve as a catalyst for systemwide change" or "school choice will give every parent the opportunity to choose the best school for their child" tend to blur the issues and make over-generalizations about how and why people choose and even their ability to choose. Research has demonstrated that not all parents choose alike. In fact, research on some choice initiatives has demonstrated that even when given the opportunity to choose, many low-income parents fail to make "rational" choices (Lee, Croninger, & Smith, 1996; Wells, 1996; Martinez, Godwin, & Kemerer, 1996). To avoid this confusion, and in the hope of providing some solutions, it is helpful to delineate two additional purposes of the charter school movement and the values, or assumptions, that lie behind these purposes.

Specifically, the charter school movement can be said to have two interrelated yet distinct purposes regarding who is to be served by charter schools. Each purpose focuses on the overall goal of increased academic achievement and contains the potential for systemwide change or reform. The two are "individual equity" and "group equity." These two ideas, combined with the differing views of charter schools as a means of reform, or a means of revolution, form the basis for a clear understanding of current policy decisions and future policy implications.

Comprehensive Education Reform and Systemwide Change (Reform or Revolution)

Concepts such as comprehensive education reform and systemwide change (reform and revolution) are often confused and are continually questioned. While debates over the hows and whats of educational change will continue for years to come, it might be helpful to make a practical distinction between "reform" and "revolution" as presented in this report. Comprehensive education reform involves a realignment of the *functional* relationships structured in the educational organization in a particular state. For example, reform may significantly alter the relationships between state boards of education, school districts, and schools, while the organizational components of the system remain intact. Systemwide change (revolution) involves a total realignment, or overhaul, of both the *organizational* structure and *functional* components of a state educational system. For example, revolution may create new organizational structures with new functions while eliminating local school boards, superintendents, and other traditional organizational components. (For a discussion of organizational and functional components of education systems, see Hutchins, 1994.)

One of the more persuasive arguments for charter schools is that they will promote systemwide change—a radical restructuring of the current system of public education. This argument, while appealing to discontented parents and teachers who see the entire public school system as a failure, does not take into account the success of many schools, and school districts, in diverse local settings and a variety of cultural perspectives. Many public schools are high achieving, high quality, and well supported by parents and teachers. However, a disproportionate amount of these schools are in suburban, or middle- and upper-class, communities. Many low-income and minority families lack the ability to choose these schools, thus contributing to stagnant and often declining academic achievement and socioeconomic status over the past 20 years (Allen & Jewell, 1995; Dimond, 1995; Kozol, 1992).

The current system of public education works quite well for various populations while not well at all for other populations. Thus, the question of systemwide change begs the question of "Change to *what* type of system?" Policymakers should be aware that different proponents of charter schools may have different views as to what this system might look like. Do advocates of systemwide change, or education reform, aim to achieve some measure of equity within the system or do they simply want to modify the existing system? Specifically, policymakers should be concerned with what type of change is best for their constituency and what policy decisions are needed to instigate this type of change. Is systemwide change necessary (leading to a new structure of public education) or can the public school system improve significantly through internal reform?

Systemwide Change (Revolution)

Assumptions and Values. Proponents of systemwide change contend that the public education system is in disarray. The schools, and the system in general, they contend, are inefficient, filled with bureaucracy, incapable of change, not held accountable for results, and incompatible with the realities of modern society. Charter schools, as a mechanism of choice, innovation, and increased accountability, will provide the competition necessary to force the current public school system to radically change the way that they do business or else lose their students. It is unclear what the "new" structure of public education will look like, although it is probably safe to assume that it will require a higher level of school accountability and an emphasis on local control and flexibility. Rather than being held accountable to locally elected officials, schools may be held accountable to universities, local communities, or alternate education agencies. School districts and local school boards will have different functions and may not even exist (see, e.g., Reigluth & Garfinkle, 1994; Mitchell, 1994).

> Most likely, schools will look different, with different missions and different core curriculum. Schools won't be uniform.

In essence, the argument for systemwide change is focused on changing the organizational structure of schools, and school bureaucracies, to allow for innovative teaching and learning strategies that hold the promise of increased academic achievement for all students. To this degree, the intent of the charter school movement is not to create a public school system made up of millions of charter schools (although that is a possibility); rather, the intent is to force the entire public school system to radically rethink, and change, its educational direction and the organizational philosophy that currently determines educational practices.

Research and Policy Alternatives. The basic assumption held by advocates of systemwide change is that a majority of parents and students will actively choose the school that best fits their requirements and, in doing so, force traditional public schools to change. This assumption is based on the premise that most parents, if given the opportunity to choose, will make rational decisions regarding that choice. However, research demonstrates that many parents, even when given the ability to choose, do not become active, or necessarily rational, choosers (Martinez, Godwin, & Kemerer, 1996; Wells, 1996). The ability, and desire, of a parent to make a choice about their child's school is contingent on a variety of variables, not solely the availability of choices. School choice movements, such as charter schools, may in fact increase the disparity between the rich and the poor, the non-minority and the minority, if safeguards are not implemented to ensure that all parents become active choosers. If the goal of charter schools is truly to provide the impetus for systemwide change, then nearly all parents and students in low-performing schools must make the active decision to attend another school. Charter school policy should aim to guarantee that all parents and students have the equal ability (knowledge, education, understanding, and so on) to choose—especially those students in low-performing schools.

> SEAs or LEAs could be mandated to provide parent education programs. The marketing strategy for charter schools could involve educating parents.

Second, policy should allow for the development of a substantial number of diverse and high quality charter schools. The existence of two or three charter schools in a large urban district does not provide any semblance of real choice to the majority of the parents and students in that district. Third, policy should allow traditional public schools the flexibility and motivation to restructure their organizational structure and acquire elements of accountability and increased choice. Finally, policy should ensure that charter schools are granted flexibility to create suitable accountability and evaluation mechanisms that will be strictly enforced at a later date.

All limits on the number and type of charter schools could be raised substantially.

Charter schools could be granted the greatest amount of fiscal and curricular autonomy in all school-related decisions.

In summary, the four main policy components that may have the greatest influence on charter schools as a catalyst for systemwide change are:

1. **All parents must be educated about the availability of choices and the importance of a high quality education. All parents must become informed and active choosers.**

2. **States should support the creation of a substantial number of diverse, and high quality, charter schools to allow for real choice among all parents.**

3. **Mechanisms and policies should be implemented that allow the traditional public school system to restructure using charter schools as a guide.**

4. **Charter schools must achieve high academic standards and be strictly held to self-designed accountability measures.**

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Comprehensive Education Reform

Assumptions and Values. Proponents of charter schools as comprehensive education reform agree that there are major problems with the current public school system. However, charter schools are seen as one component of national and state efforts to reform the public school system rather than a means to radically restructure the current system. Charter schools are presented as an additional resource, a choice, that can add to the alternatives already available to parents and students while incorporating a much needed element of accountability into the public school system. Competition and choice, it is argued, will increase the number of innovative programs in schools and contribute to high academic achievement. More importantly, it is hoped that this competition will facilitate the transfer of fiscal and curriculum innovations developed in charter schools (and other innovative public schools). Overall, student achievement will rise as a result of reform efforts. In other words, charter schools are valued as a component of public education and not as an alternative to public education.

Research and Policy Alternatives. The basic assumption presented previously is that increased innovation, choice, and accountability will contribute to education reform and allow organizational, fiscal, and curriculum innovations to filter into the traditional public school system. This assumption hinges on two premises: (1) that students will learn better, and more, in innovative programs; and (2) that choice and accountability will encourage traditional public schools to incorporate innovations developed in charter schools. Research has demonstrated that innovative programs do tend to enhance student achievement (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Hannaway, 1991; Gardner, 1995). Innovative practices have existed for many years in traditional public schools: in magnet schools, alternative schools, schools within a school. However, these innovations have failed to make a significant dent in the stagnating and falling achievement scores for school districts in blighted areas. Individual schools have demonstrated improvement; however, singular improvements are not often transferred through the district or to other schools out of the district. If charter schools are to contribute to comprehensive education reform, care must be taken to enhance communication and collaboration between charter schools and traditional public schools (as well as among existing schools of choice).

Additionally, studies of the effect of school choice movements on academic achievement in low-income and minority populations have been ambiguous at best. Witte's (1996) controversial study of the Milwaukee voucher system found little, if any, variance in student achievement between participants in the choice system and a random sample of students in the Milwaukee public school system (Witte, 1996). Other research has demonstrated that parents don't necessarily choose an alternative school because of specific innovative programs or practices (Henig, 1996). Choice and competition do not ensure the transfer of innovative ideas into the traditional public school system. Choice programs, when left to exist in isolation, may tend to increase economic and racial stratification. To overcome this dynamic, especially if the goal is comprehensive education reform, steps need to be taken to guarantee that all parents and students have the ability to choose and, additionally, that successes in charter schools are transferred to, and utilized by, traditional public schools.

First, to promote comprehensive education reform, policymakers should incorporate all, or nearly all, local and state reform efforts into charter school policy even though this may place additional regulations on charter schools. In some cases, charter schools may provide a testing ground for new reform initiatives. The isolation of charter schools appears to contribute to systemwide change, while partnerships between charter schools and local school districts may facilitate comprehensive education reform. Second, policy should facilitate collaboration and dialogue between charter schools and the local school district. Policymakers may want to place more emphasis on the development of conversion charter schools as opposed to newly created schools. Third, if charter schools are to function as a testing ground for innovative teaching and learning strategies, mechanisms must exist to transfer those innovations into the traditional public school system. Charter school policy should implement mechanisms to ensure this transfer. Finally, charter policy must continue to emphasize that all charter schools are to be held accountable for results. States could require that a state-level accountability and monitoring system be designed and implemented.

States could require that charter schools specify how they will incorporate state reform initiatives and standards in their curriculum.

States could target funds to conversion charter schools.

States could mandate that superintendents and principals/leaders from charter schools and traditional public schools meet and collaborate on a monthly or bi-monthly basis to explore best practices.

Four general policy alternatives that influence charter schools as a component of comprehensive education reform:

1. **Most, if not all, state reform efforts and initiatives should be incorporated into charter school policy. Charter schools should meet all state education reform standards and guidelines.**
2. **Charter schools should be required to coordinate their activities with the local district (usually the sponsoring district). Charter schools should be required to engage the local district and community as part of their charter.**
3. **Mechanisms and policies should be implemented which contribute to the transfer of innovations into the traditional public school system.**
4. **Charter schools must achieve high academic standards and be strictly held to accountability measures in accordance with state reform efforts.**

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Individual Equity and Group Equity

Charter schools present new and diverse possibilities for parents, teachers, and students. As previously stated, charter schools allow parents and teachers to: (1) convert an existing public school to a public charter school (deregulation/decentralization) or (2) create a new public charter school. The founders of these two types of charter schools have very different reasons for starting their school. Conversion schools are typically large urban schools that are converted to gain fiscal and curriculum autonomy and improve academic achievement (RPP International and University of Minnesota, 1996). Newly created schools, on the other hand, are usually smaller schools created by parents and teachers who want to realize a vision (Ibid.). Furthermore, conversion schools typically continue to serve the same student population (usually at-risk populations), while close to 20 percent of newly created schools focus on a special population. These two types of charter schools raise questions about who is being served by charter schools. Currently, charter school legislation in 12 states and the District of Columbia gives preference to charter schools that focus on students at risk of failing (Hirsch & Banks, 1997).

The emergence of conversion schools and newly created schools, established for very different reasons, leads to an interesting dynamic. Newly created schools give *groups* of parents and teachers with similar cultural, ideological, and/or learning philosophies the opportunity to develop and create the school they envision. On the other hand, conversion schools allow teachers and parents the opportunity to restructure an already existing school in the hope of improving academic achievement. While there is indeed much overlap—some conversion schools do focus on the requirements of certain groups or populations, and some newly created schools do focus on at-risk populations—it is apparent that conversion schools and newly created schools present the possibility for two distinct conceptions of equity in our public schools. Specifically, policymakers should take into consideration two questions: (1) Do we want to provide for more equitable access to quality education for all children, especially minorities and lower-income children (*Individual Equity*)? and (2) Do we want to provide equitable opportunity for different groups of parents and teachers to develop curriculum and teaching strategies specific to their cultural and ethnic identity (*Group Equity*)? While these two questions are not mutually exclusive—policy can be designed to contribute to both group equity and individual equity—emphasis on either perspective can lead to different policy implications and repercussions.

Individual Equity

Purpose. Proponents of individual equity contend that the purpose of charter schools is to provide all children, especially at-risk, low-income, and minority students, equal opportunity to choose and attend a high quality school. Charter schools, they attest, are the mechanism to be used to dually provide parents and teachers the ability to create a new charter school within their neighborhood or choose to restructure schools in blighted communities. This ability to choose or create a high quality school will promote the real possibility of parity in educational results for all students. Further, it is hoped that charter schools will provide the impetus for other public schools to improve and provide additional choices to at-risk students.

Examples:

1. Conversion charter schools that use their fiscal and curricular autonomy to reduce class size, modify the curriculum, and provide a better learning environment for low-income, minority, or at-risk students

2. Newly created schools that specifically recruit and/or provide an alternative for low-income, minority, or at-risk students

Assumptions and Values. Individual equity contends that all individuals in society should have an equal opportunity to achieve high standards and attend a high quality school of their choosing regardless of ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic level.

Research and Policy Alternatives. The concept of individual equity is not a new idea. The ideals of equality, equal opportunity, and equity are core aspects of public education. Public education, based on the ideal of equality, is supposed to provide high quality education so that all children have an equal opportunity to succeed in our society. Indeed, public education has allowed children from poverty-stricken neighborhoods to rise above their social class and thrive. However, the majority of low-income and minority students, especially in our inner cities, are trapped within an educational system that tends to reinforce, or reproduce, existing social classes (Bowles, 1971; Rist, 1970; Wilson, 1987). There are a variety of reasons for the failure of public education to provide equal opportunity and individual equity to the children of this nation (see Giroux, 1983, for discussion). Individual equity, in the context of charter schools, requires that all students, especially student populations at risk of failing, be given the opportunity and ability to choose a high quality education and attain high standards. This opportunity currently exists only for middle- and upper-income families and small segments of at-risk populations.

Policy could specify that a high percentage of (or all) charter schools target students at risk of failing or are conversion schools focused on at-risk populations.

If the goal of the charter school movement is to make individual equity a reality rather than an unrealized goal, policy must focus specifically on those parents, and students, who are unable or unwilling to make choices about education. First, charter policy should specifically target both conversion schools in blighted neighborhoods and newly created schools that target student populations at risk of failing. Targeting of funds specifically to at-risk communities will provide choices to populations that currently do not have access to high quality education. Second, training and education should be provided to the parents of at-risk, low-income, and minority students so that they become active choosers. Parents need to be made aware of available choices, in addition to the importance of education, so that they can exercise their choice. Third, policy should emphasize increasing the number of charter schools in geographic areas that demonstrate need. Finally, charter schools must be held accountable for the performance of their students. Increasing student achievement in the poorest and most difficult neighborhoods will be the

SEAs or LEAs could provide parent education or even require that all parents make a choice where to send their child to school.

most difficult task facing charter school founders and teachers. The implementation of accountability mechanisms, it is hoped, will allow parents and teachers to succeed where the traditional public school system has failed.

States could require that the charter-granting entity (in conjunction with the school) specify evaluation mechanisms, demonstrate intent to monitor, and publish results on a yearly basis.

Four general policy alternatives that impact individual equity:

1. **Emphasis and preference should be given to (a) the development of conversion charter schools located in blighted districts or focused on at-risk students; and (b) the creation of newly created schools that target at-risk students and/or demonstrate efforts to fulfill desegregation requirements.**
2. **Training and education should be provided to the parents of at-risk, low-income, and minority students regarding the availability of school choices and the importance of exercising choice.**
3. **Emphasis should be placed on increasing the number of charter schools in geographic areas that demonstrate a need for high quality schools.**
4. **Charter schools must achieve high academic standards and be strictly held to accountability measures as defined in the charter.**

Group Equity

Purpose. Group equity contends that the purpose of charter schools is to provide *various groups* of ideologically and culturally distinct parents, teachers, and students the equal opportunity to choose, develop, and attend a high quality school specific to their cultural values and beliefs. The ability to choose a high quality school will promote the real possibility of parity in educational results for diverse groups of students. Charter schools are the mechanism by which parents and teachers can develop and implement a public school with a specialized curriculum based on distinct cultural learning and teaching styles.

Examples:

1. Conversion or newly created schools that use their curricular autonomy to: a) implement a specific core curriculum such as Core Knowledge, Paieda, or Montessori; or b) implement a curriculum specific to a particular ethnicity or culture

2. Newly created schools that use their curricular autonomy to implement alternative teaching methods to attract and serve former home school students and students disenchanted with traditional public school

Assumptions and Values. Group equity contends that culturally and ideologically different groups in society have different learning requirements and that a curriculum, and school, created solely around the needs of that particular group will best suit the requirements of that group. Further, there is the assumption that different groups in society have a right to develop and choose the type of school and curriculum that they feel best fits the needs of their particular belief system.

Research and Policy Alternatives. The concept of group equity is a powerful idea that is rapidly emerging in many areas of American society. Colleges continually grapple with the views and demands expressed by various groups on campus. Many Afro-centric groups, feminist groups, and gay and lesbian groups demand equal respect and recognition based upon their group identity. No longer is it safe to assume that everyone accepts the doctrine "all men are created equal." The definition of equity, for many, is shifting from the concept of "equal rights" on an individual level to "group rights." This shift in attitude and reality is readily apparent in our larger cities, which while omitting the outward appearance of cultural diversity are in fact becoming increasingly ethnically and economically segregated. Our understanding of equity in America is shifting as society becomes more diverse and different views and perspectives become mainstream.

Regarding charter schools, the United States Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR) recently stated that charter schools may recruit special populations as long as the recruitment process is directed toward the general population (OCR draft report, 1997). Thus, according to the OCR interpretation of federal law, charter schools that meet the requirements of specific groups and/or populations are acceptable. To make matters more complicated, the concept of group equity takes on additional issues when viewed in the arena of *public* education. Specifically, policymakers must address the question of using public money to support different teaching and learning styles based on a particular cultural or ethnic perspective. Is the public ready to accept a different view of equity?

Policymakers may want to ensure that charter-granting agencies take responsibility for granting charters that make exclusionary schools less likely.

Group equity does not necessarily mean that all, or even a majority of, charter schools will focus on a special population or group. In fact, current charter school laws that allow for groups to design their own school based upon their group vision also grant the greatest freedom to parents and teachers who want to create a school focused on students at risk of failing or a school focused on diversity. Group equity, when implemented, walks a fine line between group specialization as a means to enhance education and group specialization as a means to exclude the ideas of opposing groups. When does tolerance and respect for difference infringe upon individual rights? There is no real way to know what might happen to the charter school movement, given the current lack of research, if charter schools are given the greatest amount of flexibility and autonomy. There may be thousands of specialized charter schools focused on serving special populations with specialized curriculum, or there may be thousands of schools focused on integrating and improving the current public school system. This is an ongoing debate at many levels in American society.

If group equity is to be truly given a full test, policymakers must provide low-income, minority, and other groups of parents and students the resources and information necessary to actively make knowledgeable and informed decisions when presented with the opportunity to choose. This is a much more difficult task than simply writing legislation or setting up an "open" application process and declaring that charter schools are available to all. The concept of group equity carries a high potential for success if it is done correctly. Likewise, group equity also has the greatest chance of failure, and may contribute to the stratification of society, if policymakers fail to guarantee that all groups do indeed have an equal opportunity to choose. Second, parents and teachers should be granted the greatest possible autonomy (while keeping with federal guidelines) to create and develop charter schools that meet the requirements of specific groups. Third, policy should emphasize the development of an increasing number of charter schools, or provide the resources to create new schools, so that all groups of concerned parents and teachers have the opportunity to create a school if they so desire. Finally, charter policy must continue to emphasize that all charter schools are to be held accountable for results. Student achievement will not rise if schools are not held accountable for academic achievement.

Districts could be required to inform parents or community groups of their right to develop or lobby for the development of specialized schools and/or curricula.

Policy could mandate that the greatest level of curricular autonomy be granted to charter school developers.

Restrictions placed on the number and types of charter schools could be lifted.

Four general policy alternatives that impact group equity:

1. **Training, education, and resources should be provided to all parents, especially the parents of children at risk of failing, regarding the availability of school choices and the importance of exercising choice.**
2. **Founders should be granted the greatest amount of autonomy to (a) develop conversion charter schools that target the requirements of specific groups and populations; and (b) develop newly created schools that meet the requirements of specific groups.**
3. **Emphasis should be placed on increasing the number of charter schools in geographic areas that demonstrate a need for high quality schools and/or schools with a special focus.**
4. **Charter schools must achieve high academic standards and be strictly held to accountability measures as defined in the charter.**

Policy Alternatives and Implications

POLICY ALTERNATIVES AND IMPLICATIONS

The general policy alternatives corresponding to the four purposes of charter schools are presented in the following chart.

Systemwide Change	Comprehensive Education Reform	Individual Equity	Group Equity
Implement mechanisms to allow the traditional public school system to *restructure* using charter schools as a guide.	Implement mechanisms to allow traditional public schools to *transfer innovations* into the traditional public school system.	Give emphasis and preference to (a) conversion charter schools in poverty-stricken communities; and (b) the creation of newly created schools that target at-risk students.	Grant high levels of autonomy to founders to (a) develop conversion charter schools that target the requirements of specific groups and populations; and (b) develop newly created schools that meet the requirements of specific groups.
Educate and train *all parents* to become informed and active choosers.	Incorporate state reform efforts into charter school policy. Charter schools should meet all state education reform standards.	Educate and train *parents of at-risk, low-income, and minority students* to become informed and active choosers.	Educate and train *all parents* to become informed and active choosers.
Increase the number of diverse and high quality charter schools to allow for real choice among all parents.	Require charter schools to coordinate their activities with the local district. Charter schools should be required to engage the local district and community as part of their charter.	Increase the number of charter schools in geographic areas that demonstrate a need for high quality schools.	Increase the number of charter schools in geographic areas that demonstrate need for high quality schools and/or schools with a special focus.
Require charter schools to be held accountable to *self-designed* achievement and accountability measures.	Require charter schools to be held accountable to achievement and accountability measures *in accordance with state reform efforts.*	Require charter schools to be held accountable to achievement and accountability measures *as defined in the charter.*	Require charter schools to be held accountable to achievement and accountability measures *as defined in the charter.*

Each category presented represents a different perspective, or lens, through which policy decisions can be discussed and debated. Additionally, the alternatives described under each perspective have no claim on the truth. The realities of state and local politics tend to have the greatest influence on policy decisions and implications. For example, multiple sponsoring bodies might hinder collaboration in some states, while in a different context or different state actually contribute to collaboration among charter schools and local districts. Keeping this in mind, the key to using the four perspectives is to understand the implications for policy within your own local context. After the dynamics and relationships of the state and local context are understood, specific policy alternatives can be analyzed using the four perspectives as a guide to policy discussion and debate.

The policy alternatives corresponding to the four perspectives do, however, present some general suggestions, or policy recommendations, to the charter school movement as a whole. First, it seems to be very important that policy, no matter what perspective one is using, make every effort to educate and train all parents to become active choosers. Research tells us that it is not likely that charter schools will be able to promote either individual equity or group equity if steps are not taken to give all parents the ability to choose. Second, it is recommended that charter school policy implement some type of mechanism(s) designed to facilitate the transfer of innovation, accountability, and choice into the current structure of the public school system. Belief that competition alone will force traditional public schools to change underestimates the entrenchment of traditional public schools in the public sector. Third, charter school policy should continue to demand that strict accountability measures be developed and enforced by both the charter-sponsoring agency and the individual charter school. Accountability is the defining element of charter schools and the key to any type of education reform or systemwide change. These three general policy alternatives appear integral to the success of the charter school movement no matter what perspective is used.

Key policy decisions for charter schools and public education:

1. **Train and educate all parents to become actively engaged in the process of choosing a school for their child.**
2. **Provide mechanisms to transfer innovations and strategies from charter schools and existing choice schools into the traditional public school system.**
3. **Continue to emphasize accountability mechanisms and high academic achievement.**

It is hoped that the four perspectives presented in this report can shed light on, and perhaps move beyond, the variety of rationale and justifications used to support and debate charter schools. When someone argues that charter schools are about change, ask "Change to what type of system?" If someone says charters are about providing choice, or innovation, ask "Choice for whom and how is it going to happen?" Analysis and discussion of the basic assumptions supporting arguments for and against charter schools will add considerably to consistent and coherent discussion of the charter school movement, and to education reform in general. The following sections contains a matrix of policy alternatives that may be used as a starting point for informed discussion and debate.

Matrix of Policy Perspectives and Policy Alternatives

Matrix of Policy Perspectives and Policy Alternatives

Policy Areas[1]	Comprehensive Reform and Individual Equity	Systemwide Change and Individual Equity	Comprehensive Reform and Group Equity	Systemwide Change and Group Equity
Sponsorship (who can sponsor charter schools?)	Single sponsor (SEA or LEA).	Multiple sponsors (SEAs and LEAs).	Multiple sponsors including universities.	Multiple sponsors including universities and private corporations.
Applicants (who can apply for a charter school?)	Existing public schools. New schools started by educators.	No limit on who can apply (parents and teachers). Focus on conversion schools.	Most parents, teachers, and educators. No for-profits.	No limit on who can apply.
Appeals process	LEA-sponsored appeals process.	Multiple appeals provided by multiple agencies.	LEA- and SEA-sponsored appeals process.	Multiple appeals provided by multiple agencies.
Types of charter schools	Public conversion schools. Limited number of new schools.	Public and limited private conversion schools. Newly created schools.	Newly created schools. Public and private conversion.	Unlimited public and private conversion. Unlimited new schools.
Legal status of charter schools	Charter schools are part of local district (LEA).	Charter schools are legally independent LEAs.	Charter schools are part of local district (LEA).	Charter schools are legally independent (LEAs).
Student population (special-focus/at-risk students)	Charter schools target at-risk populations.	Charter schools target at-risk populations.	Charter schools target all special-focus groups.	Charter schools may target all special-focus groups.
Number of schools allowed	Limited increase in at-risk areas.	No limit in all areas (continue to target at-risk).	Limited increase in all geographic areas.	No limit in all geographic areas.
Funding mechanisms	Receive funding through sponsoring agency.	Receive funding from state or from sponsoring agency.	Receive funding through sponsoring agency.	Receive funding directly from state.
Per-pupil expenditure	PPE is negotiated with district or a percent of district average.	PPE is equal to district average.	PPE is negotiated with district or a percent of district average.	PPE is equal to district average.
Start-up funds	Start-up funds should be granted to schools.	Start-up funds should be granted to schools.	Start-up funds should be granted to schools.	Start-up funds should be granted to schools.

[1] The policy areas and specific policy alternatives draw extensively from the categories and alternatives outlined in Hirsch, E., & Banks, D. (1997) Perspectives on Education Policy Research: Policy Implications of Charter School Legislation. OERI, U.S. Department of Education (Draft copy prepared for national charter school conference).

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				Systemwide Change and Group Equity
Facilities	New schools given financial assistance for facilities.	New schools given financial assistance.	New schools that demonstrate need given financial help.	New schools given financial assistance.
Student transportation	Transportation provided for in-district students.	Transportation services outlined in charter.	Transportation provided for in-district students.	Transportation services outlined in charter.
Waivers for state regulation	Charter schools must justify all waivers.	Blanket waiver granted.	Charter schools must justify all waivers.	Blanket waiver granted.
Standards and assessment mechanisms	Must align with state standards.	Established in charter. Does not have to align with state.	Must align with state standards with some leeway.	Established in charter. Does not have to align with state.
Teacher certification	All, or nearly all, teachers should be certified.	Teachers do not need to be certified.	Nearly all teachers certified. Exceptions made for individual with specialized talents.	Teachers do not need to be certified.
Teacher status (in district)	Teachers retain pension benefits and tenure options in district.	Relationship between charter school teacher and district is outlined in charter.	Teachers retain pension benefits and tenure options in district.	Relationship between charter school teacher and district is outlined in charter.
Collective bargaining	Teachers retain district collective bargaining rights.	Charter schools operate independent of district collective bargaining.	Teachers retain district collective bargaining rights.	Charter schools operate independent of district collective bargaining.
Renewal process	Renewal process specifically outlined by the state.	Renewal process not specified by state.	Renewal process outlined by the state.	Renewal process not specified by state.
Evaluation mechanisms	Designed in coordination with district to facilitate transfer of innovation.	Designed by the charter school with emphasis on improvement of the charter school.	Designed in coordination with district to transfer innovation and improve school.	Designed by the charter school with emphasis on improvement of the charter school.
Length of charter	Set length of time.	Flexibility within a given time period.	Set length of time.	Flexibility within a given time period.

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The policy chart presented above is by no means exhaustive of all policy alternatives or even "correct" in any sense of the word. Different perspectives will, rightfully so, lead to different interpretations and ideas as to the implications and rationale for policy decisions. Additionally, the values, beliefs, and assumptions of anyone involved with charter schools tend to shift and mold the importance placed on different policies. Our hope is that the classifications presented above, as well as any other that may appear, can contribute and provide some order to the ongoing dialogue regarding charter school policy.

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Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory
101 S.W. Main Street, Suite 500, Portland, OR 97204 • (503) 275-9500